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SUBJECT

MILITARY THOUGHT (USSR): Some Problems of the March and Meeting
Engagement of Large Units of the Ground Forces

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Some Problems of the March and Meeting Engagement
of Large Units of the Ground Forces

by
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The problem of organizing and carrying out a march and conducting meeting battles and engagements is one of the most important problems in the theory and practice of military art. Marches, regroupings, troop movements, and meeting battles and engagements on various scales will occupy an important place in the combat activity of troops in a future war. The striving by the belligerents to achieve victory by means of decisive offensive operations will inevitably lead to meeting engagements and battles, which will be distinguished not only by the complexity of their organization but also by the great difficulties in conducting them.

Under modern conditions, nuclear weapons will be the decisive means of destroying the enemy in meeting engagements. But, undoubtedly, it will be impossible to achieve a final victory without aggressive and swift actions by large units, units and even small, but well equipped, detachments of ground forces. Only they are capable of quickly exploiting the results of nuclear actions against the enemy by penetrating into his deep rear. In the course of an offensive operation, meeting engagements will most frequently occur involving large units which are moving from their permanent deployment areas and areas of concentration in order to develop the operation, shift efforts to new axes, repulse counterattacks by the operational reserves of the enemy, and also in order to defeat individual enemy groupings which have broken through the battle formations of the troops of the first echelon, or destroy landing forces which have been set ashore. Therefore, research into the maneuvering capabilities of modern motorized rifle and tank divisions and into methods of moving them over great distances and of entering an engagement directly from the march in order to defeat the enemy in a meeting battle (engagement), as well as study of the methods for organizing meeting engagements of large units within the framework of an operation, has great theoretical and practical significance. The majority of these matters are examined in the work "March and Meeting Engagement of a Motorized Rifle (Tank) Division"*, written by an author collective and edited by Colonel General S. M. Shtemenko.

* March and Meeting Engagement of a Motorized Rifle (Tank) Division.
Publishing House of the Military Academy of Armored Troops, 1964, 82 pp.

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The subject is developed on the basis of the specific conditions of the Western Theater of Military Operations and taking into account the present operational and tactical capabilities of troops and combat equipment. Such an approach to research corresponds to the tasks and goals of troop training in peacetime, and permits us to practically determine and theoretically substantiate the best methods for employing ground forces large units in the meeting engagements of a future war. Appropriate provisions of the Manual for Conducting Operations and the Field Service Regulations were the starting point in determining the structure of the book and the direction of the research. In the first chapter the bases of the march and meeting engagement are set forth; in the second -- the organization and completion of a march in anticipation of a meeting engagement; and in the third -- problems of conducting a meeting engagement.

We must say that, on the whole, the author collective worked out a book which is very necessary and useful to the troops. Its value would be greater still, if the problems of a march and meeting engagement with large units had been examined at the level of an army offensive operation. After all, we know that in almost all cases marches by ground forces and their deployment to wage a battle will occur in an extremely complex operational situation. Therefore, in order to ensure the timely arrival of divisions in the area of combat actions with their combat effectiveness intact, and even more important, in order to ensure successful conduct of meeting engagements by them, it will be necessary to allocate forces and means not only from the army but also the front. Such measures as the air reconnaissance of the enemy, the landing of tactical airborne landing forces in his rear, the air defense of troops on the march, and the delivery of nuclear strikes against enemy groupings moving from the depth cannot be carried out independently by large units without substantial help from the army and front commands.

With the beginning of a war, some divisions will have to march from permanent deployment areas if, due to the conditions of the situation which had developed, they were not moved out of these areas on the eve of the war. Others will have to march from areas of concentration in order to set up attack groupings of armies (fronts) during the initial offensive operation, and also from second echelons (reserves) for the purpose of developing the offensive. A clash with the enemy is inevitable under these conditions, for his ground forces will also be on the march. Now, as we know, the capabilities of both sides to operate against one another both before the march and during it have grown considerably. And, while during the Great Patriotic War only aviation was able to operate against the

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troops, mainly in the daytime and under favorable weather conditions, today the main means of destroying troops on the march will be missile/nuclear weapons, the employment of which does not depend on meteorological conditions, time of year, or time of day. This, to a considerable degree, will hinder the movement of troops and the well-timed and organized commitment of them to an engagement.

The authors of the book being reviewed not only discuss the conditions for accomplishing a march and the nature of a meeting engagement (pp. 7-15), but also make proposals for organizing and accomplishing a march (planning, formation of columns, combat and materiel-technical support, troop control) and conducting a meeting engagement.

The increased combat and march capabilities of modern tank and motorized rifle divisions allow them to march 200 to 250 kilometers per day, and sometimes even further, at a speed of 20 to 40 kilometers per hour (depending on the time of day), and, by exploiting the results of nuclear strikes, to defeat the enemy from the march in meeting engagements within a short time. Also, the width of the zone of movement for divisions has been increased; it can reach 20 kilometers and more. This provides the possibility of selecting at least three or four through routes, which facilitates accomplishment of the march with great speed, maneuvering in the event of areas of destruction, and also rapid deployment during the initial stages of a meeting engagement.

According to the authors, there are negative aspects to increasing the width of the zone of movement: "there are serious complications in organizing reconnaissance and security and in ensuring continuous control" (p. 10). We question this statement. Even with three routes, it is possible to sharply decrease the depth of the columns of a division (to 30 to 60 kilometers). In this case, the march formation presents a sufficiently compact grouping, but at the same time one that is dispersed across the front, which ensures the necessary speed and freedom for maneuvering and is convenient for organizing security and control. But, on the other hand, one has only to reduce the number of routes to two, and the depth of the march formation of the division is increased to 100 kilometers. It is completely obvious that with such a march formation for a division it is not only more difficult to control the units of the division, but it is also extremely difficult to organize security for them and to deploy them for battle in a short period of time.

Concerning the organization of reconnaissance, a zone of 20 to 30 kilometers can be fully covered by the reconnaissance forces and means

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available in a division and regiments. In addition, reconnaissance forces and means from attached and supporting units, as well as motorized rifle and tank subunits specially allocated for this purpose, might operate in this zone.

Of course, when a march is made in anticipation of a meeting engagement with the enemy, the march columns of large units and units must be formed on the basis of the concept for that meeting engagement. But this in no way means, as the authors maintain, that march columns 'must be mixed, that is, including both wheeled and tracked vehicles' (p. 10). The capability of march columns is not determined by this. The main thing is that the columns should be as independent as possible and be capable themselves of fulfilling the tasks which will arise on the axes of their movement. The presence of combat and motor transport equipment with varying capabilities among the troops forces us to resort to a mixed disposition of march columns on the march, and in this lies their weakness, since the rate of movement of such columns is determined by the tracked vehicles.

In connection with this, during the march the speed of movement of the columns can decrease, especially when negotiating areas of destruction and obstacles, and this leads to an increase in the time needed to accomplish the march. Besides this, the dissimilar capabilities of the various types of combat equipment and transport vehicles in negotiating barriers and obstacles can cause changes in the march formation of the troops during the march. These factors must be taken into account in working out the decision for a march in anticipation of a meeting engagement.

It is quite justly pointed out in the book that, in the course of a march, large units very often will have to negotiate zones of contamination or nuclear defensive barriers. Under these conditions, the authors admit that it is possible to change the composition of march columns including wheeled and tracked vehicles "for the purpose of permitting the tank units and subunits, which possess greater protection against penetrating radiation, to move ahead" (p. 49). However, we must keep in mind that carrying out this measure requires very precise organization. A change in the march columns inevitably leads to a loss of time, and consequently, to movement into the area of combat actions at the improper time. Especially when large units are being moved up to reinforce groupings of our own troops during an offensive, they will virtually have to catch up with troops who are moving forward.

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A significant part of the book is devoted to an examination of the special features of working out a decision for a march in anticipation of a meeting engagement, and to methods of transmitting a combat task to subordinates (pp. 16-21). The authors believe that the greatest efficiency is achieved when a decision is worked out simultaneously at several command-staff levels. This method is not new. In recent times it has been extensively used in practice and, essentially, it is basic to the work of the staffs of large units and formations. The main concern now is to teach commanders and staffs to make decisions and transmit them to subordinates when there is a limited amount of time in which to prepare for the march (battle). This aspect of the problem should have been given more attention by the authors. This is necessary because, as a rule, under modern conditions the commander and staff will have to organize a march in a very short time and under complex conditions, especially during the course of an offensive operation. Sometimes, immediately after receiving a combat task, they will have to issue the appropriate instructions about the initiation of the march, during which all details concerning the fulfilment of the impending tasks by subordinates will be refined as data is accumulated.

In our opinion, it is not completely accurate to state that the decision is entered on the working maps of the commander and staff officers of a division with the necessary textual explanations reflecting: "basic information about the enemy in the zone of the forthcoming march and on the flanks; the situation in front of our own operating troops and adjacent units; the position of the division units before the beginning of the march; the disposition of the march formation; march routes; departure lines (points), movement phase lines (points) and the times they are to be crossed; areas for halts and times of arrival at them; sites for provost and traffic control posts and movement control posts of control posts..." (p. 20). There might be no more than three or four such sufficiently detailed maps in the staff of a large unit, in the possession of the commander and the chief of staff, the chief of the operations section, and the chief of rocket troops and artillery. As for other officers of the headquarters and staff of the division, depending on the post they fill, they enter on their maps only those data which they need for their work.

When a division marches farther than one day's march, it is recommended that control be exercised through the use of temporary operations groups and monitoring groups, which are moved to specified lines, to the areas for halts and to areas which are close to impassable (p. 38).

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We are not against allocating officers (groups) for monitoring. They are needed especially in areas of natural barriers, and in areas of destruction and obstacles resulting from enemy nuclear strikes. But, as the book points out, the establishment of operations groups when the division is faced with accomplishing a day's march, will hardly ensure continuous troop control during the initial stages of a meeting engagement or when the march routes of units are changed in the course of the march, since it will be very difficult then to assemble officers needed for formation of the corresponding control posts.

In accomplishing a march, the troops will experience the greatest difficulties from so-called nuclear defensive barriers. It is already being planned now to set them up extensively, especially in the Western Theater of Military Operations. But, although in developing the subject, the authors proceeded from the premise that divisions will accomplish marches in anticipation of a meeting engagement with the enemy at the beginning of, or during, an offensive operation on terrain characteristic of this theater of military operations, the effect of nuclear defensive barriers on the organization of marches and on their conduct is almost not even discussed.

According to the NATO command, nuclear defensive barriers will be set up at operationally significant natural barriers in order to disrupt the movement of troops to the front line and the delivery of materiel. The depth of such barriers could reach 250 kilometers, that is, equal to the length of a day's march by a motorized rifle (tank) division. This means that ground forces large units will very frequently have to negotiate nuclear defensive barriers both at the beginning and in the course of a march. Therefore, maintaining their combat effectiveness is absolutely essential and is one of the conditions for their successful deployment and commitment to a battle from the march. It is precisely after negotiating a barrier that the possibility of a clash with the enemy is most probable.

The book under discussion provides a detailed examination of the conduct of a meeting engagement by motorized rifle (tank) divisions (pp. 52-76). On the whole, we have no objections to the book's recommendations, which basically expand upon the corresponding provisions of the Field Service Regulations. However, we would like to criticize the authors for the fact that in the presentation the meeting engagement appears too orderly. They did not sufficiently develop their main premise that "a modern meeting engagement will be begun from great distances, and often by groupings which have suffered substantial losses" (p. 52). After all, it follows from this that a clash between the sides will not necessarily begin

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with a battle between reconnaissance subunits, forward detachments and advance guards, as previously happened, although these elements are allocated and do operate actively.

Essentially, only one of the possible variants for the origin and development of a meeting engagement is examined in the book: reconnaissance groups, a forward detachment and an advance guard are operating; they seize advantageous lines; battle is waged successfully against the enemy; and the deployment and entrance into battle of the main forces of the division are ensured. We have no objection to this sequence for the initiation of a meeting engagement. But when, in the course of the march, both sides begin to exchange missile/nuclear strikes, and then not with the means of the large units accomplishing the march but with more powerful -- army and even front -- means, the task of routing the enemy could fall to the motorized rifle and tank large units. The initiation of a meeting engagement and the conduct of it could proceed totally differently. Each side will strive to fulfil the task of defeating the troops approaching from the depth of the theater of military operations, primarily by employing nuclear weapons.

In examining the possibility of employing tactical nuclear weapons, the authors point out that the main targets for destruction by these weapons will be "the most important nuclear attack means, tank and artillery groupings and control posts, and the large units of the enemy during their movement and deployment, and in the course of the meeting engagement" (p. 58). This, in our opinion, is not quite accurate. We feel that when enemy large units are being moved, it is unlikely that tactical missiles will be employed. The main reason for this is that both the enemy targets and the means allocated to destroy them will be in transit. Besides this, the reconnaissance means of the division also have not yet been improved enough to ensure precise detection of moving targets. Therefore, the employment of tactical nuclear weapons when the troops are advancing is not only ineffective but can also have a negative effect on the timeliness of the movement of the troops into the area of combat actions and their deployment for battle.

In the course of accomplishing the march, nuclear strikes against moving enemy columns will be delivered by the rocket troops of the army (front) and by aviation. The authors of the book also speak about this. They write that, "nuclear strikes against an enemy on the distant approaches will be delivered in a number of cases also by forces of the army (front), within which a division is advancing" (p. 60). It seems to us that operational missile/nuclear means will be allocated to fulfil this

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task not "in a number of cases", but as a rule.

The recommendations offered by the authors of the book regarding the landing of tactical airborne landing forces are too general. It is not clear who will organize the landing, where the forces and means will be allocated from, and how this extremely complex undertaking will be supported (pp. 53-54). Undoubtedly, the army commander and his staff will solve these problems. As long as they lack the necessary number of aircraft (helicopters), large units will be charged with the tasks of preparing the subunits (units) for the landing and organizing combat actions after the landing.

In connection with the review of this book, we would like to direct the readers' attention to another book on this same subject -- a monograph by Candidate of Military Sciences Colonel V. D. Bakulin, 'Movement of a Tank Division from the Interior of the Country over a Great Distance to the Area of Combat Actions in the Initial Period of a War', published by the Military Academy of Armored Troops at the end of 1964. On the basis of the experience of exercises with troops, and taking into consideration the capabilities of combat and special equipment and the various transport means, the author very thoroughly examines the conditions and requirements for moving a tank division. He investigates possible methods of movement and also the procedure for its organization and implementation. All theoretical and practical recommendations are based on corresponding operational-tactical and technical calculations.

Both the book we have reviewed and the monograph contain many interesting and useful theses on the problems of a march by large units and their conduct of a meeting engagement. Many of the recommendations and proposals, in our opinion, will greatly help generals and officers in preparing for skilful actions on the march and in a meeting engagement.

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